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The Outlook in East Germany

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THE OUTLOOK IN EAST GERMANY

THE PROBLEM

To assess the outlook in East Germany in the short run, with particular reference to the likelihood of serious internal disorders and the effect on internal stability of certain contingencies.

SCOPE NOTE

This paper supplements other SNIE's on East Germany (SNIE 12-4-61, "The Stability of East Germany in the Berlin Crisis," dated 15 August 1961 and SNIE 12-4-60, "The Situation and Prospects in East Germany," dated 3 May 1960), which deal in some detail with certain aspects of the East German situation and outlook not treated here, or treated only briefly. The main intent of this estimate is to assess the outlook for internal stability, with emphasis on resistance potential, especially as affected by the erection of the Berlin wall.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Popular discontent in East Germany, enhanced by economic grievances and disappointments, has increased since the closing of the Berlin sector border last August. However, there is no evidence of significant organized opposition. It is possible that a major revolt could develop from local outbreaks, especially if the regime's authority appeared to the populace to be breaking down. On balance, however, we believe that the presence of Soviet military forces and the memories of their use in past repressions will deter the people from rising up in revolt unless they have reason to expect decisive help from the West. In any case, we believe that the Ulbricht regime could suppress any disturbances except a widespread uprising, in which case the Soviets would provide active assistance.

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THE ESTIMATE

I. GENERAL SITUATION

2. East Germany, despite the abrupt solution of its critical refugee problem by the closing of the Berlin sector border, continues to constitute Moscow's prime headache in Eastern Europe. Estranged from the people and unable to marshal their nationalist sentiments behind its programs, the regime continues to rule and to reconstruct society in East Germany along Communist lines by repressive methods. Moreover, the fact that vital Soviet interests are here in open confrontation with those of the West impels Moscow to maintain 20 divisions of Soviet troops in the country. For the Soviets, stability in East Germany is of great importance, both because of the struggle with the West over Germany and because Moscow is aware that an uprising in East Germany could spread eastward to threaten the entire Soviet position in Eastern Europe.

3. To manage their East German Satellite, the Soviets have for many years relied on the capabilities of the redoubtable Walter Ulbricht. The Soviets are aware that he is an object of revulsion to the German people, and as such is a serious political liability. Nevertheless, his skill in coping with factions and rivals in the Socialist Unity Party (SED), and his agility in adapting himself to the changing winds of policy and doctrine coming from Moscow have made him virtually indispensable as boss of the East German regime. No individual or group in the SED at present is capable of effectively opposing him, even if disposed to do so. His presence is of great importance to the stability of the regime. While the Soviets may at some point wish to replace him by a person less unattractive to Germans, both East and West, we believe that they are unlikely at this juncture to risk his removal.

4. Ulbricht's party apparatus is not an altogether reliable instrument, especially at the local level, where functionaries are frequently loath to inflict the regime's disagreeable policies upon the people. On the whole, however, it is adequate, and we see no evidence at present of the kind of party disunity that existed in Poland and Hungary prior to the upheavals of 1956. The regime has felt better able to enforce harsh discipline upon the populace since the closing of the Berlin sector border made large-scale emigration impossible. However, the closing of the border, by denying escape to the more disaffected and rebellious elements of the population, has also complicated the regime's control problems.

5. We believe that the East German security forces could suppress almost any disturbances short of a widespread popular uprising of major scale. Since the closing of the sector border the frontier and alert police have been augmented in strength, and efforts have been made to improve their reliability and effectiveness. In addition, the six well-equipped army divisions would be a factor in any serious internal crisis, but the regime would probably be reluctant to employ them against the population because of doubts as to their reliability. The Ministry of State Security, through its informer network, keeps a careful watch on all these forces, and could detect at an early stage any attempts to organize significant dissident action against the government. However, the regime's control of the country rests in the last analysis almost entirely on the population's awareness of the presence of Soviet force. If a large-scale uprising should occur, Ulbricht would almost certainly have to call on the Soviets for active assistance.

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Economic Factors

6. Economic grievances and disappointments add a substantial reinforcement to the basically political disaffection of the East German population. To be sure, the general standard of living in East Germany is still the highest in the Bloc. During the 1950's consumption increased steadily, and workers' incentives were maintained not only by the actual improvement in living conditions but also by expectations of further improvements. During the last two years, however, increases in consumption have slowed down, the demand for quality foods has increased faster than the supply, and the distribution of food has become more irregular and more inequitable. At the same time the supply of other consumer goods, especially better quality clothing and consumer durables, has lagged far behind demand. Moreover, there is little prospect of improvement in the near future. The regime itself has finally had to admit that it could not make good its promises of raising the standard of living, but must instead stiffen labor discipline, restrict wage increases, raise prices, and extend food rationing.

7. The failure of Ulbricht's inflated plans for economic growth not only has contributed to popular dissatisfaction, but also has significantly impugned his leadership in the SED and in Moscow. Industrial growth has been far slower than planned. Agricultural production has declined, in large part because of the effects of forced collectivization in 1960. Ulbricht, who had disregarded the advice of economic experts in framing his plans, must now bear the responsibility for their failure. It is clear that there have been important disagreements within the party over economic issues. These disagreements have made Ulbricht even more dependent than he was before on Soviet support.

8. Because of Ulbricht's stubbornness, and to protect their economic interests, the Soviets

had to intervene to set aside his extravagant plans for economic growth. As a result of this intervention and Soviet material assistance,¹ the immediate difficulties are being overcome and a transition to more realistic planning is being undertaken. The close involvement of the Soviet Union in East German economic policies and planning, however, has further impaired the prestige of Ulbricht in Moscow and the picture of East Germany as an increasingly strong and self-sustaining nation that had been promoted by the regime.

II. THE POTENTIAL FOR RESISTANCE

9. The closing of the Berlin sector border had a major psychological impact on the East German people. The immediate shock at the loss of their escape route and their ties with West Berlin and West Germany was accompanied by further disillusionment with the West over its failure to react. This has since given rise to an increased feeling of hopelessness, as demonstrated by an increase in the suicide rate. At the same time, it has resulted in a substantial increase in popular hostility to the regime, manifested by passive resistance, restlessness and grumbling, and in sporadic acts of sabotage, especially in rural areas. This attitude has sharpened the discouragement already brought about by the regime's harsh economic policies, by food shortages, and the disappointment of expectations that living standards would improve. Thus the erection of the Berlin wall in one important respect had an effect opposite that anticipated by the SED leaders, who expected that as a consequence of the action of 13 August the population would be more malleable to its will.

10. *The Workers.* Since the events of 13 August the industrial workers have been sub-

¹ For 1962, aid of \$310 million has been promised East Germany in the form of goods, roughly double the aid which we estimate it actually received in 1961.

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jected to heightened pressure for greater production efforts without wage increases, and at the same time have encountered privations in day-to-day life. Nevertheless, the regime has had little trouble from the workers, who have the German's traditional respect for authority and obligatory attitude toward work. There is some evidence of passive resistance, strikes, and even occasional sabotage, but no sign of organized opposition. In any case, mindful of the key role played by the workers in the 1953 uprising, the regime is particularly attentive to their mood, and would be likely to take some action to alleviate discontent among the workers before serious opposition developed.

11. *The Professional Classes.* Among the professional classes, whose ranks were already severely thinned by emigration prior to 13 August, resentment is particularly strong because of the severance of ties with their counterparts and fields of specialization in the West. Isolated instances of open but unorganized opposition have been reported among teachers and university professors. The regime continues to offer inducements to the professionals to cooperate, but we believe that it will be no more successful in the near future than in the past in enlisting significant support from this group.

12. *The Youth.* Antiregime sentiment is more virulent among youth and students than any other segment of the populace with the exception of the farmers. It was apparent even before 13 August, but it has been enhanced by the curtailment of the refugee flow, which had regularly included a substantial proportion of youth, and by the harsh measures taken to tighten control over the population since that time. Nevertheless, the regime has encountered only minor and scattered resistance from youth to the conscription law, and no major campaign to boycott it has materialized. Moreover, the government has moved speedily and ruthlessly against

youthful leaders of antiregime manifestations and thus far has been able effectively to forestall any organized activity in this group. In the absence of conditions more propitious for organized or widespread opposition, we believe that the youth will be unable in the next few years to coalesce into a significant challenge to the regime.

13. *The Peasants.* Discontent has been strong in the countryside in the wake of the forced collectivization of 1960 and the unrelenting pressure on the peasants since that time. The uncooperativeness of the peasants has been an important factor in the decline of agricultural production. In addition, since 13 August, incidents of open defiance, though sporadic and unorganized, have been frequent in the rural areas—especially such acts as the burning of farm buildings, and the improper feeding and illicit slaughter of livestock. The regime has been so concerned about the attitude of the peasantry that it has sent hundreds of agricultural specialists and party and government functionaries to the collective farms to exhort the peasants to greater efforts, though this measure is likely, if anything, to increase peasant resentment. The countryside, however, is not suitable for organizing active opposition on a large scale, and we believe that the regime should have little trouble, with its security forces, in keeping the rural populace under control.

III. THE LIKELIHOOD OF AN UPRISING

14. Despite the resentments of the population, sustained by the oppressive measures of the regime, we believe that a general uprising occurring spontaneously is unlikely. It is always possible that local incidents could spread into an outbreak of considerable magnitude, but such developments are not possible to predict with precision. The condition most conducive to such a development would be the popular impression that the authority of the

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regime was faltering or breaking down. This could occur if the regime's behavior was uncertain or contradictory, as was the case immediately prior to the 1953 uprising. We also believe that certain outside events, such as a power struggle in the USSR, an intense crisis in relations between the Communist states, or greatly sharpened East-West tensions over Berlin would considerably increase the likelihood of a general uprising in East Germany. On balance, we believe that the presence of Soviet forces and the memory of the repressions in 1953 in East Germany and 1956 in Hungary will continue to act as effective deterrents to a mass uprising. In the absence of unusual external developments, as outlined above, the people of East Germany are not likely to engage in rash action on a large scale unless they believe that decisive aid from the West will be forthcoming.

IV. THE EFFECT OF CERTAIN CONTINGENCIES

15. Greatly sharpened tensions over Berlin would arouse the regime's apprehension with respect to popular unrest. In such an event, we believe that the Soviets and the East German regime would considerably increase internal security measures as a precaution. Such measures would be likely, in turn, to cause the populace to be more cautious in taking actions which might provoke ruthless repression.

16. If, in response to Soviet actions threatening the Western presence in Berlin, the West launched limited military operations to maintain access, the East German populace would probably not rise against the Communist regime. But hopes of liberation would be aroused and in the confusion the purpose of Western action might be misconstrued. There probably would be local demonstrations of defiance, and it is possible that these would expand into an uprising on a considerable scale, especially if the military operations continued and were enlarged. In any case,

ground operations in the vicinity of the frontier would probably be regarded by many East Germans as an opportunity for escape, and attempts to do so would probably occur on a mass scale. In such an event, efforts by security forces to prevent breakouts could result in open outbreaks of resistance which might become widespread.

17. We believe that Western attempts to organize or stimulate an uprising in East Germany would not be successful unless launched in conjunction with Western military operations. Even in the absence of Western military operations, some elements of the populace would probably respond to appeals for active resistance by undertaking sabotage and other local acts of defiance. As long as these acts remained localized, however, we believe that the regime would have little difficulty in suppressing them. On the other hand, there is a good chance that appeals for passive resistance would receive a wide response, particularly under conditions of increased tension in which the West was firmly resisting a strong Soviet challenge to its position in Berlin.

The Effect of Ulbricht's Departure

18. The inherent weaknesses of the SED, and its heavy dependence upon the 68-year-old Ulbricht, will make the succession problem especially difficult in East Germany. His death or incapacitation would almost certainly bring into question, not only in the population but also within the party, the durability of the hard-line policies with which he is so thoroughly identified and perhaps even the stability of the regime itself. The Soviets at this juncture would be greatly concerned to head off a crisis of authority. While they are in a strong position to do this, the loss of Ulbricht would face the Communist regime with a severe test, and it is possible that overt manifestations of unrest would occur.

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19. The USSR, in addition to issuing pointed reminders that the regime is guaranteed by Soviet force, would almost certainly intervene actively to head off any dangerous factional struggles among Ulbricht's lieutenants. Some form of collective leadership would be likely, at least as an initial measure. Thereafter, if stability still seemed to be threatened, the Soviets might bring to the fore a successor whose capabilities, like those of Ulbricht, lay primarily in the area of intimidation. They would probably prefer, however, to develop a more moderate East German leadership better

equipped to pursue conciliatory domestic policies and to make the regime a more acceptable partner for the confederation schemes which the USSR regularly urges upon West Germany.

20. If the Soviets decided to remove Ulbricht, the problems of the succession would be far more complicated because of the dangerous confusions that would appear in the party and the population. This would be an operation of such political delicacy that the Soviets would be unlikely to attempt it without a prolonged period of careful preparation.

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